DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 061 208 TE 002 850

AUTHOR Alison, James N.
TITLE The Quest for Priorities.
PUB DATE Oct 71
NOTE 4p.
JOURNAL CIT CITE Newsletter; v5 n1 p6-9 October 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Administration; *Communication Skills; *Composition (Literary); Course Content; Cultural Enrichment; Decision Making; *Educational Objectives; Emotional Development; *English Curriculum; Language Development; Organization; Problem Solving; Student Evaluation; Teacher Influence; *Teacher Role; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Great Britain

ABSTRACT

The main problem of the English teacher is discussed. This is stated to be administrative, i.e., he has to make a decision to determine how to organize all that he wishes to teach within the limitations imposed upon him by unavoidable circumstances. General aims regarded as appropriate for academic courses for British pupils in third, fourth, fifth and six years are presented. These include the development of communication skills and the enrichment of intellectual and emotional life through varied and pleasurable language activities. The point is made that the teacher of English has a responsibility to guide his students toward salutory reading experiences. With respect to composition, three points are made: (1) Teachers should spend less time testing and more time teaching; (2) Composition work should be done regularly in the classroom; and (3) Practice and assessment should be frequent and systematic. (CK)

CITE Newsletter, Vol. 5,
No. 1, October 1971.

THE QUEST FOR PRIORITIES

JAMES N. ALISON
Principal Teacher of English, Hazlehead Academy, Aberdeen

ED 061208

The first sentence of this document, C.C.E. Bulletin No. 4 — English in the Secondary School Later Stages—is crucial: "The English teacher's main problem today is an administrative one: not so much how to determine *what* he should teach as how to organise all that he wishes to teach within the limitations imposed upon him by unavoidable circumstances."

Most of us will, I think, agree that our current dilemma is an organisational one, but we may be inclined to define it rather differently from the Bulletin. If we are unwary enough to accept the Bulletin's terms, we certainly have a problem on our hands! It seems to me that we *cannot*, by any feat of organisation, teach *all* that we at present wish to teach. It is true that the Central Committee has, over the past five years, done much to codify a system of acceptable aims for English teaching, but in practice the "unavoidable circumstances" which this Bulletin identifies dictate that the teacher cannot tackle all that he has come to feel he should be attempting. He is therefore still called upon to make major decisions about "what" and "what not" — even amongst activities which he views as educationally beneficial and which are in keeping with the Central Committee's philosophy. He is relentlessly compelled to act, consciously or otherwise, upon his own system of priorities governing activities, skills, texts, time—and all the other determinants of his predicament. Since from the teacher's point of view the administrative problem is still very much one of selection and priorities in what is to be taught, the reviewer is bound to ask whether Bulletin No. 4 actually helps him to solve it or merely makes it more oppressive than ever.

The Bulletin starts with a statement of the general aims that it regards as appropriate to academic courses for pupils in third, fourth, fifth and sixth years. These—the development of the communication skills and the enrichment of intellectual and emotional life through varied and pleasurable language activities—are the goals that with admirable consistency it has urged upon us from the first. The formulation of these differs little in essentials from that to be found in Bulletin No. 1. Nevertheless, it is worth repeating in the context of academic courses in the upper school, since at this stage goals are more usually defined, by teachers and pupils alike, in terms of performance in national external examinations.

That the Committee sees the awkward question of the relationship of such exams to its system of aims as a matter of vital importance is clear from the structure of the document. It begins with a brief, forceful statement of policy on the topic in Chapter 1, but resolutely delays all further discussion of examinations until after three detailed chapters on *Reading, Composition* and *Language Study*. In these the advice given derives from its fundamental assumptions about pupils' needs, not from scrutiny of exam requirements.

The Bulletin classes external examinations among "the unavoidable circumstances" that constrain the teacher. It seems to accept the system resignedly, without much enthusiasm. It concedes that teachers feel a duty to get children through the exams, but recognises also that many regard them as "essentially inimical to good teaching," and gives its blessing to experimentation in search of alternative forms of assessment. Accompanying these general misgivings we find an almost embarrassing satisfaction with the present form assumed by the various S.C.E.E.B. examinations. There is, however, no real inconsistency here: the Bulletin believes that "a careful consideration of the examinations will show that pupils who are to achieve a satisfactory performance will need to develop all of the skills we have stated to be important." Most of us would agree that these exams do on the whole permit and even encourage enlightened teaching, but are likely to regard the further claim that they actually *require* it for "satisfactory performance," as a well-intentioned blackmail which inadvertently reveals certain ambivalences in the Committee's attitude. The main message is, however, clear enough; if the English teacher will concern himself in his teaching methods with the personal needs and development of his pupils along the

TE 002 450

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

lines of the principles set forth in the Bulletin, exam success should take care of itself. If you want it in writing, see pages 8 and 9!

The Bulletin's core is the three chapters in which these principles are applied to *Reading, Composition* and *Language Study*. It is by these that its usefulness must be judged. On its first page it refuses to regard its list of principles as an order of priorities on the grounds that "we consider all these aims to be interdependent"; but teachers need some clarification here and it is therefore gratifying to find that in fact when it comes to *Reading*, the Bulletin is prepared to nail its colours to the mast and define priorities in the teaching of English. The important practical implications of this definition should not be lost upon us. First and firmest emphasis is placed on *Literature:*

"Without continuous and committed experience of literature our pupils will not develop the skills, insights and sensitivity of the truly educated person."

Believing thus, it makes no apology for giving pre-eminence in the English syllabus to pupils' private reading and its guidance by the teacher. It holds as an item of faith, shared I believe by most of us, that private reading holds the key to the English skills. (There is certainly a correlation, and it may well be a causal link.) This assertion by the Bulletin of the primacy of guided private reading for upper stage pupils deserves to be recognised as the bold definition of a novel priority for English teachers in Scotland. Taken seriously, its implications for the traditional deployment of time, energies and resources are revolutionary. If appreciable time is to be found in a six-period weekly allocation for the useful stimulation and guidance of the individual reading of 28 fifth year pupils, then something else must go! This needs to be spelled out clearly.

Perhaps the Committee does not itself fully appreciate how much it is asking of the class teacher here:

"It should be the teacher's aim, therefore, to treat each pupil separately as a client whose own preferences and capabilities must be considered in the guiding of his reading."

This, of course, emerges from a cardinal principle of the Committee's philosophy; but it places a very heavy burden on the teacher. It must be remembered that the average English teacher will make some 180 pupil contacts per day and that in some large comprehensives 80-100 of these are likely to be in the "upper stages." Even after a month or two of a new session he will be lucky if he has a command of their *names*, let alone the intimate personal knowledge presupposed here. You cannot transform a pupil into a "client" or a class into a "clinic" (or a "workshop" for that matter) simply by using words. You must, in the end, be prepared to tackle some of these "unavoidable circumstances" which the Committee quietistically accepts as beyond its remit.

The Bulletin moreover imposes upon the English teacher an interpretation of his role in guiding reading which most of us would surely reject as intolerable even if it were practicable.

"The teacher of English has an obligation to lead his pupils towards more salutory reading experiences, and must therefore seek to direct them towards books which in his judgment are *better* for them. No responsible teacher will suggest a book to a pupil unless he is reasonably satisfied that the experience is a beneficial one. The English teacher must accept individual responsibility for what he recommends; but his advice will not be responsible advice if it is not securely grounded in both a thorough knowledge of his pupils' individual backgrounds and characters and an awareness of the contents of the books he suggests to them."

This is a counsel of perfection and absurdity! Even if the teacher does know his pupil thoroughly and does know the book thoroughly, he cannot surely predict the interaction. The teacher who considers he knows what is "salutory," "better" and "beneficial" for each of his pupils, and what are "the right kinds of book" for them, is in danger of being cut off from his charges by his own arrogance.

It may be, of course, that all we have here is an unwise choice of a morally paternalistic metaphor to make the perfectly acceptable point that teachers should help pupils to avoid spending time on books that are artistically regressive and over simple for their stage of development. Most of us would guide fifth and sixth year pupils away from writers as diverse as Captain Johns and Micky Spillane for this reason. But the signs are that this is *not* an insignificant lapse. The Central Committee's literary doctrine has been the subject of extended discussion in the columns of the T.E.S. throughout the summer. In an article of 13th

August, Mr I. Milligan (referring to the earlier Bulletins) aptly expressed what is likely to be the reservation of many teachers about the Committee's confident expectations:

"Literature is finally an intensely private matter: souls we might say, tend to grow in the dark and the private relationship lies between the reader and the book . . . to shoulder the responsibility for seeing that such growth takes place seems too heavy a demand to make of English teachers or indeed of the teaching profession as a whole."

It is not inconsistent, I trust, to welcome the Committee's emphasis on guided private reading (and the sensible advice it gives about the use of libraries, reading lists and the like) and, at the same time, to question its view of the teacher as guide.

Turning to what the Bulletin calls *Close Reading*, we find that this is not the traditional Interpretation exercise. It places much greater emphasis on stylistic matters and ranges much more widely for its material. It subsumes most of the activities that we associate with Interpretation and Practical Criticism. Here the Bulletin studiously avoids mention of text-book collections of material and implies that the teacher will cull much of his material from newspapers, magazines, advertisements and other contemporary sources. The practical difficulties of this are great, but there is no denying the wisdom of the advice. All depends on the resources that the teacher can command. In its discussion of *Close Reading* the Bulletin continues to be helpful in clarifying priorities. It believes that lessons devoted to the close study of a piece of material are necessary to the development of the reading skills: these can be developed "only if such lessons are arranged with some frequency"; but at the same time it insists that despite all that can be done during these lessons, "it should be made plain to pupils that there is no satisfactory substitute for intensive continuous private reading." In other words, it encourages teachers to regard close reading lessons as important, but *less important than* the encouragement and guidance of individual reading. "That's *not* what we said," the Committee might rejoin, and I could understand their wariness. But teachers make such calculations, and in my view the document supports this particular one.

On *Composition* it must be said that the Bulletin's advice, while clear enough, is less than helpful—or cheerful. In 1952, on the last occasion that an authoritative statement was made on the English syllabus for upper classes (English in Secondary Schools, S.E.D., 1952), the Inspectorate made three points about composition:

(1) Teachers should spend less time testing and more time teaching.

(2) Composition work should be done regularly *in the classroom.*

(3) Practice and assessment should be frequent and systematic.

This advice can have had little effect over the last twenty years; for the Bulletin's chapter 11 is largely a re-statement and amplification of these points. The tone is less brutal, the amplification is thoughtful; but the burden placed on the teacher is just as heavy. The suggestions offered for reducing the load are unlikely to alleviate matters appreciably. The conscientious teacher will doubtless continue, with breaks for eating, sleeping and living, to do what he can.

Paradoxically the comments on *Language Study* are less lucid but more useful! Conscious that after the developments of the last eight years, teachers are uncertain about the position of formal language study in the work of their senior pupils, the Bulletin is concerned principally to allay anxieties. Only a "modicum" of grammatical knowledge is needed—enough to explicate a term when the need for that term arises. This knowledge can be acquired informally by what the Bulletin calls "the process of mention." It is unwilling to prefer any one model of grammar and falls back ultimately on what it calls "feel" for the language. A fuller treatment of language study is promised in Bulletin No. 5; but it is difficult to see what more needs to be said. Formal language study unrelated to the contexts of Reading and Composition previously discussed has a very low priority indeed.

Having established its views on its three main topics—*Reading, Composition* and *Language Study,* the Bulletin, as already mentioned, returns in greater detail to the S.C.E.E.B. examinations, 'O' grade, 'H' grade and 'C.S.Y.S.' The courses that it deems appropriate to the 'O' or 'H' grade exams and consistent with its own philosophy entail some use of units of study and thematic studies. In addi-

tion to general comments on the organisation of these, the Committee tries to meet a criticism levelled at Bulletin No. 2 by providing a set of four examplars of Thematic Studies, worked out in considerable detail by the teachers responsible. These exemplars (Love and Marriage, Friendship, Death, Circumlocution) cannot be done adequate justice in a brief note. Suffice it to say that they repay the closest scrutiny and are a most valuable feature of the Document. It is possible that three of them may, however, depress the reader unnecessarily by their neatness, polish and lack of explanation (the study on *War* has notes appended). I can accept them as plans that a teacher *hoped* to carry out *or* as a record of what he actually managed to achieve; but what I cannot readily accept is that they are, at one and the same time, plan *and* record of achievement. I don't believe that any English teacher could carry out period by period, day by day, for *fourteen weeks* any scheme as originally planned. It would have been reassuring to have had some brief clarification appended to each example.

When we come, finally, to set Bulletin No. 4 beside the relevant sections of Bulletin No. 2 and the C.C.E. survey, *The Plays We Teach*, one omission strikes us. So far, little has been said of the handling of " drama " in the upper stages other than as the study of dramatic literature. Perhaps the Committee is reticent here because it feels that drama should increasingly be regarded in school as a discipline in its own right. This is probably a desirable development: but it is one that is worth looking at closely.

Like its predecessors, Bulletin No. 4 is in some ways a slightly unloveable document. It shares with them an excessive confidence in the results of " planning and organisation "; it makes alarming normative statements about " the good English teacher," " the modern teacher " and " the responsible teacher " which have us glancing furtively over our shoulders; it makes little attempt to circumscribe realistically the responsibilities and burdens of the class teacher. All this is a pity: for there is no likelihood that a pupil's experience of English will be pleasurable, as the Bulletins rightly require, if his English teacher is worried and overworked. The jaded management philosophy that supposes that the workforce will operate efficiently only if it is kept anxiously on the hop should have no place in the sphere of education.

Yet viewed as a whole, this latest statement of the Central Committee is genuinely helpful to the teacher in his quest for priorities. It encourages us to see that it is in our pupils' interests that we should concentrate less obsessively on examinations in the upper school; it exorcises, once for all, these pedantries of formal grammar, old and new, that still haunt us: It offers detailed schemes of work for consideration; and above all it powerfully supports our conviction that it is uniquely worthwhile to help adolescents to explore and enjoy literature.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY James N. Alison and "CITE Newsletter" TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."